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ABSTRACT

The central purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that inalienable possession (IP) in Romance languages hinges more on inferences than is commonly assumed. Most of the analysis concerns Spanish because that language provides the best evidence of how IP is non-grammatical in the sense that it is free of morpho-syntactic constraints. French and Italian data are cited when parallel to Spanish. Generally pedagogical manuals instruct the student to avoid the possessive adjective with inalienables, usually parts of the body. Analysis of several types of sentences indicates that IP lacks any constant tie to a given morpho-syntactic pattern and that the link between possessor and inalienable seems dependent more on contextual plausibility than on any unequivocal grammatical signal reserved for IP. The conclusion makes some observations on comparable structures in French. (AMH)

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Inalienable Possession in Romance: Grammar or Inference?

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(This is a slightly revised version of a paper given at the annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, New York, December 1981.)

In the section "The Grammar of Inalienable Possession", Fillmore 1968 argues for cross-linguistic status of inherently relational nouns. He musters an impressive array of data illustrating the morpho-syntactic diversity with which languages express inalienable possession, but implicit in that section's title was the assumption that i.p. is universally a grammatical phenomenon, certainly in deep structure and likely in surface structure too. In the light of recent debate over pragmatics vs. syntax vs. semantics, I don't want to give the impression of attacking Fillmore for not having had the prescience to consider pragmatics in 1968. His arguments and even more so, his data, still convince me that i.p. is indeed something we must deal with on a macro level, and the conclusion of this paper will briefly look at i.p. in terms of a cross-linguistic scale of grammaticization.

My central aim, however, is to demonstrate that i.p. in Romance hinges far more on inference than is commonly assumed.¹ Most of my analysis will concern Spanish, which provides the best evidence of how i.p. is non-grammatical in the sense that it is free of morpho-syntactic constraints. French and Italian data are cited when parallel to Spanish. The last third of the paper will examine two bits of possible counter-evidence to the claim that i.p. is non-grammatical.

At first glance, Spanish i.p. appears solidly linked to certain syntactic criteria. Pedagogical manuals instruct the student to avoid the possessive adjective with inalienables, the possessor being indicated via a dative:

(1) Le lavé las manos a Pedro. 'I washed Pedro's hands.'

or the subject:

dtv.

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- (2) Levante la mano. 'I raised my hand.' ²
subject

Separable NP's take a possessive adjective or a de-phrase:

- (4) Lavé el coche de Fulano. 'I washed X's car.'

While it is true that an English inalienable modified by a possessive will most often be rendered in Spanish with the definite article, such a statement is a gross simplification. (5), (6) and (7) are counter-examples to this syntactic distinction:

- (5) Unos labios secos aplastaban su mejilla. 'A pair of dry lips pressed against his cheek.'
- (6) Me lavé el carro. 'I washed my car.'
" " el mantel. " " " tablecloth.'
- (7) Me moví la mano (del cadáver). 'I moved the hand (of the corpse).'
(Acknowledgments to E. García.)

It.: Mi sono mosso la mano (del cadavere).

In (5) the inalienable mejilla 'cheek' is modified by the possessive su, and in (6) clearly separable nouns take the supposedly inalienable pattern. (7) shows us that even if a normally inalienable noun carries a separable reading, this does not preclude its occurring with dtv. plus def. art. To assume complementary distribution, as evidenced in (2) vs. (3), is thus to shut out perfectly valid data and prevent us from understanding the semantics of the dative, definite article and possessive adjective. By dropping the assumption that inalienables require distinct syntax, we can focus on minimal pairs like (8) and (9), which bring out the semantic contribution of the dtv. le:

- (8) El embajador le besó la mano. 'The ambassador kissed her hand.'
It.: Il ambasciatore le baciò la mano.
- (9) El embajador besó su mano. 'The ambassador kissed her hand.'
It.: Il ambasciatore baciò la sua mano.

le in (8) conveys that its referent was much more involved in the verbal process than was the referent of *su* in (9), in which the hand kissing is presented as a

mere act of protocol. With some contextual preparation, it is even possible to have the dative co-occur with the possessive. If the woman is extremely eager to have her hand kissed, and if her hand is only one of several to be so honored by the ambassador, (10) was acceptable for some of my informants:

(10) Por fin, el embajador le besó su mano. 'Finally, the ambassador kissed her hand.'

(11) and (12) show that the same co-occurrence may arise in Italian and French:

(11) Non ti guardare i tuoi piedi. 'Don't look at your feet.'

(12) Il m'a pris mon bras. 'He took my arm.'

Informants characterized these examples as somewhat stilted, overly emphatic, regional and/or colloquial, but did not dismiss them as foreigners' errors. On the other hand, the compatibility of both dtv. and possessive with some inalienables is beyond question. (13), from a Peruvian novel, was considered fine by all my informants:

(13) ¿No te da vergüenza hacerle su turno al Jaguar? 'Aren't you ashamed of doing Jaguar's turn for him?'
 (poss. inal. dtv. (from M. Vargas Llosa, La ciudad de los perros)

Dtvs. and possessives may contrast also when the inalienable is subject:

(14) Me duele la garganta. 'My throat hurts.'
 It.: Mi duole la gola. " " "
 Fr.: La tête lui tourne. 'His head's spinning.'

(15) Sus ojos seguían abiertos y sus oídos en guardia. 'His eyes remained open and his ears on the alert.'
 It.: Gli occhi d'Alberto sono aperti. 'Albert's eyes are open.'
 Fr.: Les yeux d'Albert sont ouverts. " " " "

As traditional grammars have pointed out, a subject inalienable regularly needs a possessive, since the dtv. may be semantically inappropriate. In (14), a dtv. arises because the sore throat and dizziness naturally affect the possessor, while in dtv.-less (15) the purpose is to describe the eyes and ears, minimizing or backgrounding the involvement of the possessor.

A further and perhaps all-too-obvious fact which counters any codified link between definite article and inalienables is that the latter may be modified by any other determiner, as in (16):

We have seen that i.p. lacks any constant tie to a given morpho-syntactic pattern. Moreover, the speaker-hearer is under no compulsion to treat any given noun as inalienable: (17) could be said in reference to one of the speaker's own dresses or about a dress tried on in a shop:

The link between possessor and inalienable thus seems dependent more on contextual plausibility than any unequivocal grammatical signal reserved for i.p.

(18) Je lui ai lavé la figure. 'I washed his face.'

(19) Paul baissa la tête. 'Paul lowered his head.'

5

(Kliffner, ms.), is less closely tied to the verb than the acc., i.e. less caught up in the verbal process. With actions performed on a body part, the latter is more directly affected than its owner, as in

(23) Me torcí el tobillo. 'I twisted my ankle.'

Far less plausible would be the opposite, where the person is central and the body part peripherally affected but still closely enough involved to warrant a dtv. role. Of course, many verbs allow the possessor to be acc., but then the body part must occur in a locative phrase, as in English:

(24) A Fulano le acaban de tatuar el pecho. 'They've just tatoored X's chest.'

dtv. acc.

(25) A Fulano lo acaban de tatuar en el pecho. 'They've just tattooed X on
 | |
 acc. obj. of prep.
 the chest.'

In (25) the acc. possessor undergoes the verb's impact more strongly than its dtv. counterpart in (24).

The extra-grammatical nature of i.p. is even more apparent in sentences containing more than one potential possessor. The hand in (26)

(26) No me levantes la mano. { 'Don't raise your hand at me.'
(from Roldán 1972) { 'Don't raise my hand.'
{ 'Don't raise the (separable) hand at me.' }

It.: Non alzarmi la mano.

Fr.: Et voila qu'il me lève la main. 'And so he raises his hand on me.'
'And so he raises my hand.'

could belong to the subject or the dtv. With two possessors and two inalienables, the number of possible readings increases of course, but here we observe what may be a grammatical constraint. Sentences 27-34 allow only three of the possible four readings, as detailed in the glosses for (27) and (28):³

(27) Nino me puso las manos en los bolsillos. (from Roldán 1972)

- (a) Nino put his hands in his pockets (in spite of my warning).
 (b) his my
 (c)* my his
 (d) my my

(28) No me saques el anillo del dedo.

- (a) Don't take your ring off your finger (for my sake).
- (b) your my
- (c)* my your
- (d) my my

(29) It.: Non togliermi l'anello dal dito.

- (a) '...your...your' would require ti in place of mi.
- (b) Don't take your ring off my finger.
- (c)* my your
- (d) my my

(30) Enrique me sacó el pañuelo del abrigo. 'E. 'to me' took the hankie from the overcoat.'

(31) Maria te cosió el botón de la blusa. 'M. 'to you' sewed the button on the blouse.'

(32) Eduardo me colocó la cinta en el brazo. 'E. 'to me' placed the ribbon on the arm.'
It.: Eduardo mi mise il nastro sul braccio.

(33) A mi papa le arranqué las fotos de la cartera.
'I snatched 'to my father' the photos from the wallet.'

(34) Fr.: Il me passa la main à la nuque. 'He 'to me' put his hand on the nape.'

Word order changes had no effect on the interpretations. Postposing the subject of (27) to give (35) failed to bring about any change in the glosses:

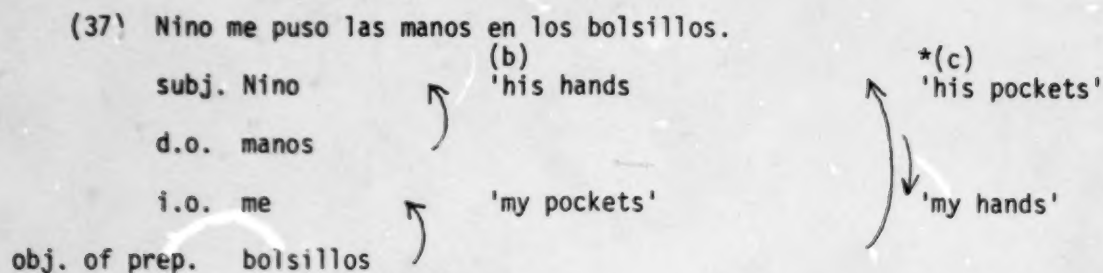
(35) Me puso Nino las manos en los bolsillos.

I first hypothesized that perceptual complexity was the key to the multiple glosses of (27) and (28). One possessor, the case in glosses (a) and (d), poses less of a processing task than the two of (b) and (c). Yet, reading (b), with two different possessors, was more often the first interpretation given by informants than (a), where both inalienables are assigned to the subject. Nothing in the way of a true explanation suggests itself yet, but the constraint does bear a correlation with Keenan/Comrie's accessibility hierarchy, originally formulated to reflect ease of relativization. Their hierarchy is given in (36):

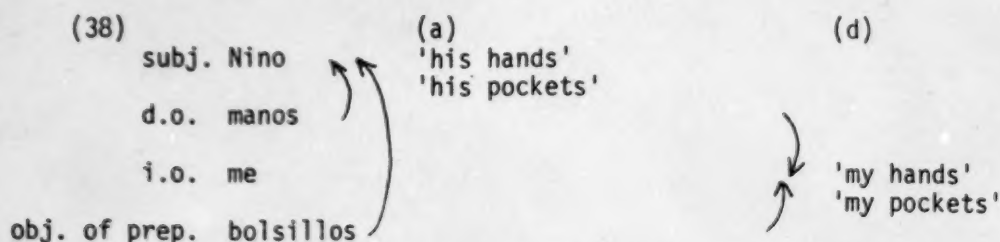
(36) SUBJECT > D.O. > I.O. > OBLIQUE > GENITIVE > COMPARATIVE

If we take OBLIQUE to mean object of a preposition, we see that reading (b) in (27) and (28) relates inalienables and possessors in accordance with this ordering,

but (c) violates it as shown in (37):



Single possessor readings (a) and (d) are like (b) in that neither involves a crossover, as we see in (38):



I suspect this constraint is of a perceptual rather than purely grammatical nature, but to confirm processing complexity as a reason would require us to demonstrate a correlation between the accessibility hierarchy and some independent parameter of processing. It is probably not a matter of topicality, since Givon 1976 shows that this criterion places i.o. above d.o., contrary to the Comrie/Keenan hierarchy. I leave the matter open.

Double datives are another area where syntactic constraints seem to involve i.p. Under very restricted conditions, Spanish allows two dtv. clitics for a given verb. First, the semantically "outer" dtv. can only be first person. Second, there are lexical constraints as to the verb: I will say tentatively that only actions allow a second dtv. Third, the construction appears to be socially delimited: all the examples of it arise most naturally in an informal context, typically a parent-child dialogue. Finally, if the verb has an object, the latter must be inalienable. Examples (39) to (41) satisfy these requirements, but (42) to (44) were rejected, presumably because the objects were separable:

- (39) No te me ensucies las manos. 'Don't get your hands dirty, for my sake.'
- (40) Ay, pobrecito, ¿cómo te me rompiste la pierna? 'Oh, poor thing, how did you break 'me' your leg?'
 It.: Come mi ti sei rotto una gamba?
- (41) Ponte estos guantes, que no quiero que te me quemes los dedos.
 It.: Non voglio che mi ti bruci le mani.
 'Put on these gloves because I don't want you burning your fingers.'
- (42) *Conque te me rompiste el trencito que te acabo de comprar.
 'So you broke the little train I just bought you.'
- (43) *Por favor, no te me quemes la alfombra.
 'Please, for my sake, don't burn your carpet.'
- (44) *Ahora quiero que te me pintes las paredes.
 'Now I want you to paint your walls for me.'

A diehard syntactician would perhaps object that here we surely have evidence of i.p.'s grammatical status. Between his position and García's statement⁴ that i.p. is not a grammatical category in Spanish, I believe the evidence calls for some kind of middle ground. Spanish i.p. can for the most part be handled via the feature of inherent relatedness characterizing inalienables, as well as its relation to the semantics of possessives, the definite article and the dtv. Compared to languages which manifest a distinct i.p. morpho-syntax, Spanish is clearly impoverished for such unequivocal signaling, as demonstrated in the first part of this paper. Yet, the restrictions on co-designation with more than one possessor, as well as double dtv. constraints suggest that somewhere in the system of Spanish we must acknowledge even this minimal effect of i.p. García's claim that all Spanish i.p. phenomena belong to inference rather than language structure thus seems too strong, especially in the light of Fillmore's cross-linguistic data.

In spite of its "Romance" designation, this paper has admittedly given short shrift to languages other than Spanish. Especially since its dative manifests greater lexical and contextual flexibility than its French and Italian counterparts, Spanish provides the strongest case against handling i.p. syntactically. In

terms of a grammaticization scale, French i.p. appears to rank considerably higher, since it offers a much closer fit with the pattern of dtv. plus definite article. Notwithstanding the comments on p. 4 about Herschensohn's co-designation analysis, we should note that such a pattern is normally restricted to body parts (and, incidentally, action verbs) in French, to wit:

(45) Je me suis lavé les pieds. 'I washed my feet.'

(46) J'ai lavé mon pantalon. 'I washed my pants.'

(47) *Je me suis lavé le pantalon.
cf. Sp. Me lavé el pantalón.

This is not to deny that possessive-dtv. minimal pairs are possible. Hatcher 1944 analyzes the difference between the two in stylistic terms, while my impression is that the contrast is analogous to that observed with (8) and (9). The point is that the restriction evidenced in (47) reflects an i.p.-involving constraint non-existent in Spanish, even though the flexibility of interpretation in (18) and (19) suggests that French i.p. is not as syntactically-bound as Herschensohn presumes.

This rather sketchy conclusion will be the starting point for a closer cross-linguistic look at i.p. on a scale of grammaticization, taking into account the distinction between the syntactic and pragmatic modes presented in Givón 1979.

Footnotes

1. I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Roldán 1972 and García 1975. My arguments on the non-complementarity of datives and possessives owe much to Roldán, and my insistence on the role of inference for determining what belongs to whom derives primarily from García, who contends that i.p. is not a grammatical category in Spanish.
2. The dtv. is dispensed with if the action is one which the organism can only perform on itself. Thus, in contrast with (2), Me levanto la mano would mean 'I force my hand up (e.g. with my other hand).' Herschensohn 1975 treats French analogues of (2) as a special "intransitive" category for her interpretive i.p. analysis. I would contend the peculiarity lies in the verbal process, not the inalienable. The semantics of the dtv. also comes into play (cf. García 1975, pp. 128-130 and Kliffer 1979).
3. (30-34) are glossed literally, but exhibit the same possessor-inalienable combinations as (27) and (28). Photos and ribbons (cf. 33 and 32) belong at best on the fringe of i.p., but their occurrence in a frame parallel to (27-28) resulted in the same range of interpretation. Such fuzzy semantic boundaries make a syntactic case for Spanish i.p. all the more implausible.
4. García 1975, p. 281-282.

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